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ABSTRACT

This report presents information from North Carolina middle school principals and teacher leaders on the characteristics of effective middle school teachers. Principals indicated that knowledge, organization, and passion were the top middle school teacher characteristics. The report suggests that there are three types of teacher leaders: those who are organized, those who are productive, and those who are creative. Principals felt that organized teacher leaders have few personal needs, have good relationships with their administrators, are dependable and conscientious, do a great job, and are well respected by their colleagues. All of the principals were able to identify specific teachers in their schools who were leaders and who had the strengths of organization, productivity, and creativity. Respondents agreed with research findings that teacher leaders need encouragement, trust, and to be listened to. Middle school research suggests that exemplary middle schools are led by strong leaders, and those leaders display such characteristics as vision, autonomy, inspiration, and evaluation. (Contains 19 references.) (SM)

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Ways to Support Teachers in High Performing Middle Schools

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Ways to support teachers in high performing middle schools
By: Nancy Bell Ruppert

This is a presentation that was given at the middle level essentials conference in Kansas City, Missouri, March, 2003.

Introduction:

Imagine, if you will, a ship on high seas. Day and night the engineers make sure that her engine room is running. A ship has gauges that indicate that all is well. Some of the literature and research that exists can help us gauge how well our ship is running. This presentation looks at the gauges of teacher characteristics, teacher-leaders in schools and leadership characteristics of exemplary middle schools.

We begin by looking at the top three characteristics of middle school teachers? If you were to write down what your view is, there is a chance that your descriptors would fall under one of these three categories: knowledge, organization and passion. Let me explain.

I work in the mountains of North Carolina and went to visit the middle school principals in our area. When I met them I asked what they believed to be the top three characteristics of middle level teachers. I then contacted middle school leaders that I have worked with over the last 20 years and compared their responses to the responses of the middle school principals in my area. The responses were consistent. The principals and middle school leaders I contacted combined for more than 300 years of middle level experience. This is what they said.

Characteristics of Middle School Teachers

Principals in this study identify one of the top characteristics of middle school teachers as knowledge. Principals are looking for middle school teachers who have knowledge of students, knowledge of subject matter and knowledge of standards. When I listed all the characteristics, knowledge type characteristics were mentioned in 24% of the responses.

The second category was organization. By organization, principals want middle school teachers who can plan integrated, differentiated lessons. They want teachers who can manage children and they want middle school teachers who are planners. Principals mentioned organization characteristics 16% of the time.

The highest response from middle school principals, 60% of the responses, has to do with passion, or the spirit at which the middle school teacher works. Principals want enthusiastic, team players in their schools. They want teachers with a sense of humor and "a heart for working with middle school children". Middle school principals want middle school teachers who have high energy, who are fair and who are good role models.

Principals in this study are looking for middle school teachers who are knowledgeable, organized and passionate about middle school children. After asking the principals what characteristics they look for in hiring middle school principals, I asked them about teacher leaders in their schools. I believe that teacher leaders are knowledgeable, organized and passionate. The middle school principals agreed. So the question becomes, if these teachers are out there, how do we support them?

Teacher Leaders

I believe there are three types of teacher leaders and each of these teacher leaders contributes to high performing middle school. I believe that teacher leaders have the characteristics of organization, productivity and creativity. **Teacher Leaders** are those teachers who are organized, are productive and are creative and whose students score well on end of year tests. **Organized Teacher Leaders** are "by the book" teachers who are very structured and do not deviate from their lessons each year. Their students always score well on end of year tests and they are considered very organized. **Productive Teacher Leaders** usually build upon their units each year, much like you would add layers to an oil painting to increase the depth and hues of the product. Their students also score well on end of year tests. **Creative Teacher Leaders** are always trying new things; they may keep some of their units but are always stretching themselves and their students by taking risks. Their students also score well on end of year tests. I described this range of teacher leaders and then asked the principals if they could identify teachers in their school who fit these profiles.

Principals' Views of Teacher Leaders

I asked the administrators to share with me their view of the characteristics of middle school teacher leaders in relation to those who are organized, those who are productive and those who are creative. I combined the responses and shared some of them.

According to the administrators, organized teacher leaders have few personal needs. Most of them have good relationships with their administrators. Organized teacher leaders are dependable and conscientious. They do a great job and are well respected

among their colleagues. Some of the administrators' responses about organized teachers include: "Oh yes," and a smile came across her face, "I can put that teacher in charge of anything and I know it will get done." One administrator mentioned that the organized teacher leader was very useful in working with beginning teachers to help them get organized. One principal identified a young (2nd year teaching) teacher and suggested that he consider becoming an administrator.

Teachers who are productive teacher leaders were also consistently identified by the administrators. Productive teachers are often tapped for having visitors in the classroom and for being given extra responsibilities. Administrators consistently tap productive teacher leaders to be sent to workshops and to participate on writing teams. One productive teacher leader is described as "having lots of choices and products for her students to be engaged in." Another administrator suggests that their productive teachers are always used as the showcase classroom and that they are used as resources for new teachers. One teacher is described as coming to the school with a special education background and she created a program for the teachers in her school to work with special needs children in her second year of teaching. Still another principal suggests that the productive teacher leader presents information to their students in any number of ways. When asked what to do with productive teachers, administrators suggest using them as models for other teachers and providing them with as much professional development as is available. Another principal recommended a productive teacher to become a lead teacher in the school to promote the use of her strengths.

Some of the descriptions of creative teachers reflect the passion creative teachers bring to schools. One principal shared, "I have a new teacher coming to me and I was

told that he may do some crazy things, but don't worry. The kids love him and he will get the job done." Another principal mentioned that for them, the creative teacher inspires other members of the staff and raises the bar in the school. Another administrator suggests that creative teacher leaders may not be as useful to beginning teachers because they are sometimes more interested in new ideas and that beginning teachers need more structure. When asked about what to do with creative teacher leaders, one principal said, "I get out of their way and let them do their thing."

All the administrators were able to identify specific teachers in their schools who were teacher leaders and who had the particular strengths of organization, productivity and creativity. I took their thoughts about what teacher leaders need according to their strengths of organization, productivity and creativity and found some consistencies, as evidenced by previous research.

What teacher leaders need from administrators.

Teacher leaders bring powerful dynamics to a staff. Their strengths of organization, productivity and creativity can infuse a school with innovation and productivity. Common threads that run through all of the administrators' views of teacher leaders are encouragement, trust and the need to listen. These responses are consistent with literature and research (Mooney, 1994; Rinehart & Short, 1993; Bell-Ruppert, 1999; and Whitford & Kyle, 1984).

The first category administrators identified as what teacher leaders need is **encouragement** (Childs-Bowen, D., G. Moller, & J. Scrivner, 2000; Keedy, J.L., P.Winter, S. Gordon, & R. Newton, 2000). Organized teachers, according to administrators in this study, need encouragement of knowing they are valued. According

to principals none of the teacher leaders need public recognition; however, they all need to be valued. Productive teachers need encouragement to try opportunities that come along. By knowing productive teachers' strengths and interests, administrators can keep an eye out for new ideas and encourage productive teachers to participate in them. Creative teachers need administrators to recognize their visions and encourage them to try them or better yet encourage them to work with other teacher leaders to come up with new ideas. Creative teachers need to know that administrators believe that it is okay to take risks. By encouraging teacher leaders differently, administrators can get the most out of their teacher leaders.

The second category that administrators agree that teacher leaders need is **trust** (Keedy, J, P. Winter, S. Gordon & R. Newson, 2000). Administrators in this study suggest that organized teachers need to be trusted with regard to their insights. Organized teacher leaders are usually very perceptive of what is happening in schools and can be trusted to be objective. The productive teacher leader needs to be trusted to let them shine in public and with the district office personnel. Productive teacher leaders provide schools with innovation and sound strategies in the classroom. These practices need to be showcased and by asking productive teacher leaders to share their products, administrators can show them that they trust their judgments. Administrators suggest that creative teachers need to be trusted to take their ideas and visions and to try them. Creative teacher leaders are willing to try many things. An administrator that trusts a creative teacher leader's vision will find that these teachers can bring new energy to a staff.

The third theme that administrators consistently shared is to **listen** (G. Caine, & R. Caine, 2000; Jordan, D., 1996; Lutz, C., 1986; Richardson, S., 1999; Sullivan, S. & J. Glanz, 2000) . Organized teacher leaders need to be listened to because they have very sound ideas. Organized teacher leaders are able to take ideas and put them into very clear, logical terms. Those who are considered organized teacher leaders may be good sources of communication about how to approach school improvement and these teachers thrive on implementing specific visions. Their value is in helping others see "the big picture." By listening to organized teacher leaders, administrators can use them to promote and encourage the strengths of their staff members. Administrators need to listen to productive teacher leaders to determine what types of professional development will help them be more productive. Productive teacher leaders are willing to grow professionally and administrators who use them to develop new ideas provide other staff members with a very good role model for change. Finally, administrators agree that creative teacher leaders need to be able to bounce ideas off an administrator. Administrators that are able to channel the energy and ideas of creative teacher leaders by listening to them can work with creative teacher leaders to inspire the entire staff.

These administrators communicate with teacher leaders by encouraging them, trusting them and listening to them. It is my thought that by looking at what principals want and what teachers need, that middle school principals have the potential to create exemplary middle schools.

Characteristics of exemplary middle schools.

Middle school research suggests that exemplary middle schools are led by strong leaders and that these leaders display the following characteristics: vision (Lutz, C., 1986;

Sherman, L., 2000 , autonomy (Ball, G., 1996; Bishop, H., A. Tinley, B. Berman, 1997; Lyons, E. & M. Shelton, 1994;Merenbloom, E.Y., 1996; Sherman, L., 2000), inspiration (Bishop, H. A. Tinley, & B. Berman, 1997; Hipp, K., 1997; Potter, T., 2001) and evaluation (Lyons, E.B. & M. Shelton, 1994). I invited middle level administrators to share their view of these characteristics. The following is a summary of their responses.

Vision:

- Have a clear focus to the entire school/community
- It is the most important to see where the school is going.
- It is essential to move forward.
- Principals must be able to communicate their vision.
- Establish the goals for all.
- Keep everyone focused and directed.
- Inspire action

Autonomy:

- Teachers have to have it
- Teachers need it
- The school is the unit of change
- Teachers need to feel the right to try
- Teachers must be given opportunities for decision making
- Allow staff to think outside the box
- Ideas grow and flourish.
- Encourage staff to push themselves beyond any limits.

Inspiration:

- Principals must provide it to motivate and gratify
- It is very important, especially in November, January and right before spring break
- A good principal is first a good salesperson
- Principals must inspire. A school without inspiration cannot be effective.
- Principals must encourage and recognize that inspiration comes from others as well.
- Give credit where credit is due.
- Set examples for all
- Give staff a rallying point and a call to action.

Evaluation:

- This is critical at all facets
- That which is stressed is what is evaluated
- This is the second most important characteristic
- Everything needs to be documented objectively
- Improvement in schools must be continuous
- Principals must give lots of positive feedback as well as constructive criticism and suggestions
- Constant course correction and refinement.
- Eliminate extraneous skills
- Be sure as a principal that you care.

The principals in this study obviously care about the people who are in their schools. It is possible that administrators who are new to the middle school could benefit from the experiences and insights of these people. Our schools will be better if we begin to look very closely at who we hire (those who have knowledge, organization and passion), how we serve teacher leaders (trust, listening and encouragement) and how we address the elements of exemplary middle schools (vision, autonomy, inspiration and evaluation). It is possible that these are some of the gauges principals need to look at.

A well-run ship, runs well when all aspects of her engine room are in working order. When a ship is at sea someone is always on watch to be sure that the gauges are in the "good" zone. We all need to work together to help make sure that our gauges in our schools are in the "good" zone so that we can be prepared to be on the high seas of middle level education.

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